

Counting Nixon's Money

Reporting President Nixon's disclosures of his personal finances on Dec. 8, CBS' Dan Rather delivered an aside unusual on network television. He relayed the suggestion of White House officials that viewers scrutinize their newspapers and newsmagazines for fuller accounts of the story than TV could provide.

The acknowledgment of TV's limitation in clarifying so complex and voluminous a pile of data was accurate enough. But the advice that Americans turn to print for more lucid, complete reportage was only partly satisfactory.

day, Dec. 7, about 24 hours before the official release of the information. Presidential advisers, using charts and pointers to explain Nixon's labyrinth in cash flow and purchases, unloaded enough figures to gag a roomful of accountants. Editors for the most part followed suit, publishing an overwhelming array of disparate stories and arcane tables. The *Milwaukee Journal* and *Miami Herald*, for example, presented a kaleidoscope of summaries, texts, wire-service rundowns and assorted sidebars. The *New York Times* devoted 31 columns to the event, including four front-page stories and a two-page inside summary of 50-odd documents and records.

Cut Corners. The overkill was too often unrelieved by concise and unifying interpretative pieces that made the revelations comprehensible to those who are not accountants and tax lawyers. Two exceptions were the *Washington Star-News* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, which managed to cut through the intricacies by front-paging capsule highlights of Nixon's statement in addition to giving more detailed stories. The *Wall Street Journal*, lacking a Sunday edition, wisely published a single terse wrap-up on Monday. A few papers consulted outside specialists informally; the *New York Times* took the extra step of retaining four professional tax experts to help guide its coverage.

Editorial-page writers generally refrained from leaping to shrill conclusions until analysts had had further time to examine the Nixon statement. But a number agreed with the *Detroit News*—until recently a loyal Nixon supporter—that the disclosures may have come too late to help restore Nixon's fading credibility. Others appraised the new information as confirmation that Nixon had violated the spirit, if not the substance, of the nation's tax law. Commented the *Des Moines Register*: "He stretched for every advantage he could get within the letter of the law, if not its spirit." Echoed the *Cleveland Press*: "The picture that comes through... is that of the leader of this nation who permitted his tax lawyers and accountants to cut every corner."

Three issues in particular came under editorial glare: Nixon's nonpayment of state taxes since he became President, his modest charitable donations and his minimal federal income tax payments. In California, Nixon's voting domicile, the *Los Angeles Times* was especially offended at his failure to contribute to the state treasury. The *Atlanta Constitution* bluntly stated: "He would be charged with tax evasion if he were an ordinary citizen." Columnist Mary McGrory, noting Nixon's total 1972 benefactions of \$295, bristled: "For someone who consistently urged that private charities should take the lead in helping the un-

fortunate, he set a rather miserable example."

It was Nixon's use of questionable deductions to drastically trim his federal tax payments that drew heaviest criticism. Two weeks earlier, before the Associated Press managing editors, Nixon had disdainfully labeled certain types of taxmanship as "gimmicks." Now the *Washington Post*, conceding that Nixon (according to Judge Learned Hand's dictum) has no "high moral obligation" to give money away to the Federal Government, threw the "gimmicks" description right back at the President.

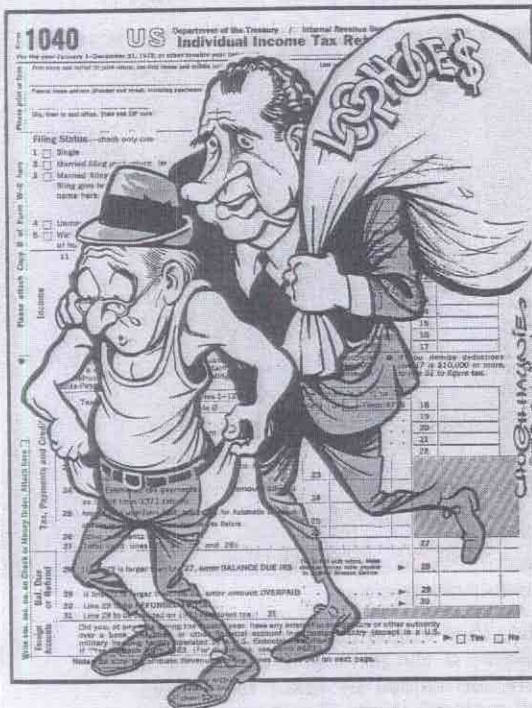
Some papers, notably the *Houston Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle*, offered mild defenses of the President or urged their readers to withhold judgment until the joint congressional committee has investigated his tax case. Hearst's *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* even found Nixon's disclosure "encouraging proof" that the President believes he has nothing to hide. But other papers went so far as to initiate or repeat calls for impeachment. Among them: the *Miami News* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. A few papers discerned a positive note of sorts by observing that Nixon's disclosures at least had offered a new and strong case for tax reforms that would close loopholes.

Principal Offense

It seemed like a good idea in 1971, when the weekly *Montgomery County, Md., Sentinel* decided to offer readers an unusual consumer service by rating all 22 of the county's high school principals. Two young *Sentinel* reporters questioned parents, teachers and students. The criteria: how successfully each principal had "established a positive, open learning atmosphere in his high school—the extent to which he leads instead of drives the students."

When the results were tabulated and published, eight principals earned "outstanding" marks, eight were termed "good," four were judged "poor" and two luckless educators brought up the rear as "unsuited." One of those two, Fred L. Dunn Jr., slapped the *Sentinel* with a \$21 million libel suit, later reduced to \$15 million.

"Why the rating?" demanded Dunn's attorney. "They destroyed a man to make money, to sell newspapers." Last week a Maryland circuit-court jury agreed and awarded \$356,000 in damages. The *Sentinel* (circ. 35,000), which has promised an appeal, argued that a verdict for Dunn would end criticism of local officials by newspapers. Ironically, one of the two reporters who wrote the offending story has since taken on national officials with impunity. Bob Woodward joined the *Washington Post* and, with Carl Bernstein, blazed an investigative trail through Watergate.



"Take comfort, my friend, in the knowledge that the law giveth and the law taketh away."

Newspapers too had a difficult time counting and tracing Nixon's money with clarity. The press's performance was mixed: massive but often confusing coverage of the financial statement; healthily skeptical conclusions on its impact.

The White House's hope that saturation reporting would aid Nixon's Operation Candor proved illusory. News accounts, unable to digest or isolate the wealth of material released by Presidential aides, pointed out how many questions remained unanswered. Many papers in the Sunday editions followed the United Press International lead, which stressed the fact that Nixon had tripled his personal wealth while in office.

It was a difficult story to report under deadline pressure in any medium. That burden was only partially eased by the White House decision to hold three briefing sessions starting on Fri-